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Late Sports Final

Scan-Van makes a clean sweep

No radiation found in Near North area

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STAFF REPORTER

A high-tech federal van, sniffing for signs of radiation in the Near North Streeterville area, has made an extraordinary discovery: For the first time in the 15-year history of the Scan-Van, it's found ... nothing!

"We were surprised," said Roger Shura of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Radiation and Indoor Air in Las Vegas. "It wasn't what we were expecting."

That "no news" was good news for residents and developers in the area north of the Chicago River and east of Michigan Avenue, where construction is booming and more development is coming.

The EPA's discovery of radioactive thorium contamination at the site of the Grand-Pier development at Grand and Columbus Drive temporarily had forced a shutdown and then a slowdown of the project this spring.

The EPA had required the complete, two-and-a-half-year cleanup of thorium contamination in the block just to the east of Grand Pier before the giant River East project, now under way, could start. The pollution had come from debris long-buried after a lantern factory was razed on the site decades earlier.

The apparent absence of further unacceptable radiation in the area also was good news for Bill Abolt,

the city's environment commissioner.

"We're glad the results sound good," Abolt said.

Rosalind Hecim, president of SOAR, the Streeterville community group that has been monitoring the radiation problem, is cautiously pleased.

After checking out the Scan-Van's equipment and crew during a pause at Navy Pier, Hecim said the findings "are great news ... but we want to see the data."

Day and night for 48 hours the van, called in by the local EPA office, tooled up one side of the street and down the other, often going the wrong way on one-way streets.

Traveling barely above 5 mph, it covered the area between Ontario and North Pier from Michigan Avenue to Navy Pier.

Among the places where no further radiation was detected was the Grand-Pier site, "and that wasn't what we were expecting," said Shura, one of the van's two operators.

Shura said that in years past, the van, which makes only one or two sweeps a year, has found "everything from undiscovered radioactive missile warheads" at the Mare Island, Calif., Naval Base to persistent, widespread contamination in residential and business areas of West Chicago. That radiation stemmed from the same, long-since-closed Lindsay Light Co., which moved from Streeterville to the Far West suburb in the 1930s.



AL PODGORSKI / SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

Mark Sells (left) and Roger Shura of the U.S. EPA say the Scan-Van's non-finding of radiation was not what they expected. Earlier contamination of the North Side area had brought construction to a halt.



The EPA's radiation-seeking Scan-Van covered the area between Ontario and North Pier.